

Memorandum

To: Chris Calabrese
CC: Andrew Fleischmann
From: Rabbi Debra S. Cantor
Date: 3/7/2011

Re: House Bill Number 6499-AN ACT CONCERNING MINOR REVISIONS TO THE EDUCATION STATUTES.

I am writing to testify in support the HB6499 as a minor revision. I hope this will be the first step leading to the mandate that Connecticut schools teach Holocaust and Genocide education, following the examples set by the states of Illinois, California, New York, New Jersey, and Florida.

I write as a rabbi, a veteran educator, an activist in interfaith issues and a parent. We live in a world dominated by hate and mistrust of the other. When I was growing up in Ellington, Connecticut, there was precious little diversity. Eight years ago, when I returned to the state with my family, I was pleased to discover that the face of Connecticut was different. There were people here from all over the globe: Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists, folks who spoke Spanish and Urdu, who wore hedjabs and dreadlocks, yarmulkas and turbans. Even places like Ellington and my new home of Newington were becoming increasingly diverse. Frankly, I was thrilled. I was happy that my kids were going to grow up in a more diverse setting than I had.

Of course, I was already aware that the world had changed profoundly; it seemed to have grown smaller, yet ever more confusing. Like so many of us, I was profoundly affected by the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath. Like so many, I felt shocked, frightened, and powerless.

And while it was gratifying to see the outpouring of love and the sense of unity across America in those early days, there was something else – something insidious and disturbing which began to be voiced more and more. I noticed a backlash against Islam and against all Muslims, against anyone looking vaguely middle-Eastern. I had actually studied quite a bit about Islam and felt very uncomfortable about the statements being bandied about. Then too, as a Jew, I was very familiar with stereotyping and scape-goating, with violence being directed against members of a particular faith or ethnic group.

I felt that I needed to learn more, to do more, to work toward greater understanding among communities. But how could I do this, beyond writing a few sermons or talking to people in my interfaith clergy group? As world events continued to unfold, as wars and religious violence exploded at an ever-increasing pace, I despaired of really being able to make a difference. I was keenly aware that once again, religion had been hijacked, and used as a weapon. It is so easy for me, so easy for all of us, to feel helpless and overwhelmed. It takes a leap of faith to even consider the possibility that we can make a difference.

Yet, I have come to believe that we must make a start, right here where we live. And I believe firmly that knowledge is the most important key to understanding. For a number of years, I have served as a board member of the Connecticut Council for Interreligious Understanding. There are nine different faiths represented on our Board. We work to promote mutual understanding and respect for all traditions, recognizing that everyone has much to learn from each other, and that we must act against religious bigotry and dogmatism. Knowledge dispels stereotypes.

Why should Connecticut mandate Holocaust/Genocide education? Because learning about the past helps us understand our world, helps us recognize prejudice, helps us make different and better choices in the future.

Every Wednesday, I teach religion at Covenant Prep, a small independent middle school for boys from under-served families in Hartford. Many of the students have never met a Jewish person before. They begin the class with stereotypes and misinformation. They leave with a sense of kinship and understanding.

As a rabbi and as an educational consultant for the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston, I observed first-hand the profound impact of Holocaust and genocide courses on middle school and high school students. They were forever changed by participating in programs such as *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*.

And as a parent, I watched my own teenaged son's understanding of history and hate transformed when he took a course on the Holocaust at Yachad, our community Hebrew High School. The course required him to interview a local survivor. That is an experience he will never forget.

None of us should forget. It is time that Holocaust and Genocide education in our state be expanded beyond a few private institutions and programs. We and our children are living in a complex and ever-changing environment. We need to ensure that the next generation does not fall prey to simplistic and hateful propaganda, that they do not let fear and mistrust guide their decisions. We need to arm them with knowledge and insight; we need to make sure they learn the lessons of the past so that they may choose to build a better world in the future.

Members of the education committee:

Please oppose Bill 1105. I am a parent of a 3 year old with autism. It is imperative that professionals working with our children have the training and credentials to provide Applied Behavioral Analysis. ABA is a proven treatment to help individuals with autism when delivered by competent trained professionals. Speech therapists and special education teachers are helpful in educating our children but do not have the training or expertise to design and implement ABA programming, this needs to be delivered by BCBA's.

Please oppose bill 1105. Our children need your support.

Thank you
Dr. Beth Joseph
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